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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1740  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/US CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001101

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: FIRST STEPS TOWARDS RE-OPENING THE  
KAZBEGI BORDER CROSSING

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. The Government of Georgia announced May 26 that negotiations with Russia were underway to open the border at Kazbegi-Zemo Larsi, the only land border point of entry with Russia in the undisputed territory of Georgia. Russia closed the border in June 2006 in order to renovate their facilities, ut recently announced that this construction was complete. Reportedly, the Government of Armenia sent a formal letter to Russia requesting that Russia open the border, and Russia, in turn, notified the Georgians through the Swiss Embassy that they were ready to negotiate on the issue. The opening of the border would not only facilitate movement between Georgia and Russia, but would also benefit the Armenian economy, which was negatively affected by the August 2008 conflict. While the opening of the border would not by itself be a catalyst for the establishment of normal relations between Georgia and Russia, it would at least represent a modest confidence-building measure, something currently in short supply. End summary and comment.

#### ARMENIANS SEEK BORDER OPENING

¶2. (C) Armenia reportedly initiated discussions on the border, sending a formal letter of request to the Russians asking that the Kazbegi-Zemo Larsi border be reopened. According to Kakha Chitaia, Deputy Chief of European Affairs at the Georgian Foreign Ministry, Russia then verbally conveyed to Georgia on May 20 through the Swiss Embassy, following up in writing on May 25, that it had completed construction of the facility at the Zemo Larsi checkpoint on the Russian border across from the Georgian town of Kazbegi and was ready to start negotiations on reopening the border. The Georgians responded, also via the Swiss Embassy, with a verbal agreement to meet with the Russians to discuss this.

¶3. (C) Chitaia said the Russians were quite surprised by the response, prompting them to ask several seemingly minor questions about the process. These questions suggested to the Georgian Government that the Russians did not expect the initial positive reply, and that they are not in fact sincere about opening the border. One of the issues raised by the Russians was whether there would be a Swiss flag present at the negotiations site. According to Chitaia, Russia wants to convey the impression that relations are as normal as possible, and therefore does not want the Swiss flag present. Chitaia dryly noted to poloffs that there are already two Russian flagged embassies on Georgian territory, and they do not need another one. Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze said publicly that reopening the checkpoint is in the national interests of Georgia, as it would allow the local population to travel unhindered to and from Russia and Georgia. Although the Georgian Foreign Ministry spokesperson noted at a press conference at the end of May that negotiations were already underway, according to other MFA officials, they are still awaiting an official response from Russia on starting negotiations.

14. (C) The Kazbegi-Zemo Larsi border point, which has been closed since June 2006, is the only land traffic point of entry between Russia and Georgia that is not in the disputed territories of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The opening of the border would benefit not only the local populations, who often have relatives on the other side, but the economy of Georgia as well. Since the closing of the border in 2006, Armenia has been forced to send its exports on a long, circuitous and expensive route through Georgia across the Black Sea to eventually reach Russia.

#### GEORGIAN CONSTRUCTION EFFORTS

15. (C) EmbOffs met with representatives from the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the Georgian Revenue Service and the Georgian Patrol Police regarding the construction of the facility at Kazbegi on the Georgian side of the border. The Kazbegi facility is funded by the United States through the Georgian Border Security and Law Enforcement Program and was built under the supervision of the Corps of Engineers. The facility was due to be completed in May 2009, but damage to the main road to Kazbegi caused by a rockslide in the spring of 2009 has affected the delivery of some key materials and equipment for the construction project. The completion date has now been pushed to late July 2009. Efforts are currently underway within the Georgian government to repair the damaged road as quickly as possible. It is not yet clear, however, whether the political negotiations will be complete by July 2009. At a follow-up meeting in Kazbegi, EmbOffs encountered an MFA official, who said that he was looking at the border facilities in anticipation of

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negotiations with the Russians, which were being planned for both sides of the border in the near future.

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